

Telling the Herstories: a perspective on Glasgow, gender and the marking of women's histories.

Adele Patrick, Lifelong Learning and Creative Development Manager and a founder of Glasgow Women's Library

Glasgow: a man made city?

I arrived in Glasgow as a student at Glasgow School of Art in 1983. My experience of living in the city in the intervening years coincides with its reinvention as a 'cultural capital'. The politicians and guardians of culture had much to make-over in the post-war period. The city endured seismic impacts in the blows dealt to its economy at this time in the second half of the 20th century and subsequently in the systematic dismantling of the major manufacturing industries in the late 1970s. This constituted an identity crisis for a city whose reputation was mythically '*Clyde Built*'.

Early efforts to reshape Glasgow in the public imagination were inaugurated with the '*Glasgow's Miles Better*' campaign, launched the year I arrived. It was born out of social and economic expediencies. Targeted at a more affluent ABC1 social group it was meant '*to inform and educate people that Glasgow was no longer the proverbial 'No Mean City.*'¹

Consequently a more complex refiguring of the city was required to support the turn to service and finance industries as well as the potential of international investment and tourism. The underdeveloped mystique of Rennie Mackintosh began to be mined alongside the construction of the new 'Glasgow Boys'. This cultural shift, and the new notion of Glasgow as a destination (rather than a launch pad for a career in London, New York or Europe) was palpably felt by those of us studying and graduating from the Art School in this period. The bravura of the new 'Boys' canon (and its gender, the clue is in the name) can be intuited in texts like the seminal *Vigorous Imagination* exhibition catalogue.²

I have written and spoken elsewhere of what was at stake in the forging of a link between past and future 'Boys'³. City 'fathers' in the post war period have been players in an explosion of regeneration that frequently deploys art, design and

¹ Legendary and celebrated as a cultural landmark by Glasgow City Council. On the GCC website it is claimed, following the launch of the campaign, attitudes changed '*overnight*', <http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/en/YourCouncil/PublicRelations/Campaigns/glasgowsmilesbetter.htm>

² '*The Vigorous Imagination*', Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, 1987

³ 'Boy Trouble; some problems resulting from the gendered, Representations of Glasgow's culture in the education of women artists and designers' Vol 16:1 *Journal of Art and Design Education*, 1997 and *Subject in Process, feminism and art* conference, CCA Glasgow, paper accessible at www.womenslibrary.org.uk/2009/10/subject-in-process/

architecture as indicative of change.⁴ Glasgow's successful transition depended on building an identity as principally an arts honey pot with shopping, cultural and international finance zones. The architectural signifiers of such change are familiar to any 'city-break' visitor: illuminated cityscapes, bridge building and riverside development. In contrast to these somewhat formulaic processes of reconstruction some cities have turned to cultural planning as an alternative approach to social, cultural and economic transformation, for example Dundee and Derry. This approach necessitates a staged process of investigation of the mosaic of existing activities, communities and resources in specific urban centres.⁵ Through this forensic level mapping of the city, a picture of where people, gatekeepers, and stakeholders are, what they create, what pathways and services and networks they use and what they consider priorities for investment and growth is required. In this process, a fostering of assets that may be 'at risk' can be undertaken with communities involved in cultural and social resources can be invigorated and conserved.⁶

Cultural planners point to significant instances of a culturally planned approach to regeneration where the outcomes have included dramatic re-visioning of cities as the antithesis of past public (mis)conceptions.⁷ I believe that Glasgow has an opportunity to recast itself as a city that is known for its celebration of women's culture, creativity, achievements and pioneers. For indubitably, Glasgow's history and its current incarnation, in the public's perception and in the civic records, still has a masculine face.

Women missing in action

With this in mind, the idea of cities having a political, economic, social and *gendered* face, that I would like to situate Sharon Thomas's new work and draw out some specific threads that iterate the idea of women's excision and exclusion both in the landscapes of Glasgow's civic and cultural past and present and demonstrate the necessity for a range of approaches by artists (and civic agency) to pull women and women's lives and achievements back into the fabric of the city.

The following images are of as yet unmarked sites in Glasgow that have had a powerful impact on women and culture internationally.

⁴ Glasgow became a Garden City (1988); a City of Culture (1990); a city of European Architecture and Design (1999)

⁵ Charles Landry posits a model where in the most significant interventions, cultural planning has enabled a reversal of fortunes for the cultural 'branding' of cities. Derry, a byword for political and cultural conflict, divided communities and apparently insurmountable 'Troubles'. Through the agency of a 'culturally planned' rethinking of the City, Derry became a renowned centre for conflict resolution. (Landry, Charles (1995) *The Cultural Planning Handbook*, Queensland, Australian Print Group, p175)

⁶ Where this strategy has worked it has eschewed the 'identikit' regeneration solutions and instead engendered diverse, idiosyncratic, attractive and sustainable cities that are owned by the broadest constituencies and are places where new organically generated hotspots for culture can be nurtured. I mention this approach here as, with the ongoing economic impact of masculinised behaviour increasingly draining resources (e.g. issues of violence and other endemic crime and antisocial behaviour policing etc.) and budgets being cut, a turn to a reflection on creating a more female friendly city might arguably be socially, politically, and economically expedient..

⁷ Landry *ibid*.



302 Sauchiehall Street, former site of the Women's Freedom League
photograph credit: Adele Patrick, Glasgow Women's Library

This is a stop on *Women Make History's Garnethill Women's Heritage Walk*. The walk is one of a series of guided trails that Glasgow Women's Library has produced to uncover and share the hidden histories of women in the city. In summary we discuss how this, now an empty, grubby looking ex- Chicken Cottage take-away was the site of the *Women's Freedom League*. This campaigning organisation had a tearoom and bookshop here during the late 19th century. Their work helped to bring about the eventual introduction of suffrage for women in Britain in 1918. We make clear that it is difficult to overestimate the importance of these campaigns and activities by women in Glasgow for women's rights across Britain and cite some of its enterprising activities and heroines. Glasgow suffragettes smashed the glasshouses in the Botanic Gardens, brazenly they took the campaign '*doon the watter*' and instigated window smashing raids in London in 1912. Doctor and minister's wife, Dorothea Chalmers Smith was imprisoned for house-breaking with intent to set fire in Park Gardens in 1913. Domestic servant and trade unionist Jessie Stephen took part in acid attacks on pillar boxes, but was never caught. Where are the civic markers for these women's achievements?



104-106 George Street, former site of the Bakhunin Press
Photograph credit: Adele Patrick, Glasgow Women's Library

Researcher Kirsty Hood, a long term *Women Make History* volunteer and more recently the editor of our series of maps linked to the tours, (downloadable at <http://history.womenslibrary.org.uk/>) uncovered this as the likely site of the Strickland or Bakhunin Press. Set up in by the anarchist communist Guy Aldred in the early part of the 20th century, Jenny Patrick and Ethel MacDonal worked on publications printed by the press and this was where they fomented their political and revolutionary careers. Ethel became a legendry figure in Glasgow and Spain for her courage in the Spanish Civil War dubbed the 'Scots Scarlet Pimpernel'. After January 1937 she began her radio broadcasts as the English speaking propagandist for the Barcelona Anarchist radio station and was listened to in many countries throughout the world. Not only did she relay the difficulties and realities of Spain internationally through her secret broadcasts she also played her part by refilling the soldiers clips with bullets, getting and preparing food and information gathering. Hundreds of people gathered on her triumphant return to Glasgow and it received blanket news coverage. Although La Passionara⁸ is one of the three women to have been given a statue in Glasgow, Ethel and Jenny's heroism is yet to be marked.

These unacknowledged landmarks of women's history were uncovered in the processes of excavation undertaken by *Glasgow Women's Library's* staff and volunteers of the *Women Make History* group. Twenty years ago, GWL was launched with aims to celebrate, conserve and encourage the generation of women's

⁸ Isidora Dolores Ibárruri Gómez (1895 –1989), "*La Pasionaria*" was a Spanish Republican leader of the Spanish Civil War and communist politician of Basque origin. The statue is located on the bank of the River Clyde at Clyde Street.

achievements and history.⁹ As the sole resource of its kind in Scotland (but one of hundreds of women's libraries globally) increasingly GWL has been considered the key hub of information by, for and about women in Glasgow and nationally. Established by volunteers the library reflected a grass-roots need for a space in the city for women's lives, creativity and dreams to be nurtured. Our lending and archive collections (all donated) now include the remarkable stories, artefacts, documents and ephemera that chart the campaigns, and individuals histories and lives of women and it specialises in the records of the second wave of women's liberation from the 1970s. Its learning programme since 2004 has focussed on *Living Histories* and *Active Citizenship*. Over the past 5 years we have facilitated volunteers and learners in activities and events that have had the express purpose of unearthing, recording and making publically accessible the diverse histories of women in Glasgow and more recently, through our national lifelong learning programme, women's lives and achievements across Scotland.

When GWL put the call out to women interested to find out more about women's history in Scotland in 2004 we had over 60 women contact us. From this first meeting the group, *Women Make History* quickly focussed their energies of developing and researching what became the first of our *Women's Heritage Walks*, in the West End of City. We had noted that an existing *Kelvingrove Walk* featured no women or markers of women's achievements¹⁰ despite its passing a neglected but significant marker of women's history and achievements, an oak planted by the suffragettes of Glasgow to commemorate their successful campaign to achieve the vote for women.



Suffragette oak, Kelvin Way
Photograph credit: Adele Patrick, Glasgow Women's Library

This was to become a poignant stop on our *West End Women's Heritage Walk* now delivered to hundreds of local, national and international participants. The research process was punctuated with moments of profound awareness raising for myself, learners and volunteers as the scale and scope of the work to be done to address the partiality of the representation of women in Glasgow was revealed. The *West End Walk* highlights the fact that the *Freedom of the City of Glasgow*, the highest award for any citizen has been awarded 138 times since 1800, seven women have been

⁹ <http://www.womenslibrary.org.uk/aboutgwl/gwlaims/>

¹⁰ <http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/99966CA0-4E03-48F2-AE38-EE1D535A4CF2/0/kelvingrove.pdf>

recipients of the award, only four of these non-royals and only one Glasgow born, Anne Maxwell Macdonald.¹¹

Unearthing this fact had a powerful impact on some of the inaugural walk participants and precipitated a series of meetings to explore the idea of a 'Roll of Honour' for women in the city, an idea that has grown a branch into our *Women on the Shelf* campaign¹². Perhaps even more significant was the opportunity that arose (in partnership with Amnesty International) to secure the Freedom of the City of Glasgow for Burmese political opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi¹³

Making Space: creating the landmarks of women's herstories.

In public, civic and environmental art contexts the visibility of women and their achievements in Glasgow's urban landscape and in public buildings remains today remarkably scant. One of the key sources for the *Women Make History* group is *The Thew Factor*, Elspeth King's accessible and groundbreaking book on Glasgow's hidden history of women.¹⁴ Her observation, that there are only three public sculptures of women in Glasgow has proved to be another arresting fact in our tours and something that mobilises the *Women Make History* volunteers and learners. In 2009 GWL took a big step towards making a marker for women's history in Glasgow in our successful bid to the former Scottish Arts Council's *Public Art Fund*. You can view a film of the *Making Space* project on the GWL website. The DVD is launched, as is this exhibition, to coincide with *International Women's Day*, March 8th. Artists Shauna McMullan and Nicky Bird collaborated with a diverse group of women connected with *Glasgow Women's Library* in working towards commissioning a public artwork to mark women's contribution to history in Glasgow.

<http://makingspace.womenslibrary.org.uk/tag/shauna-mcmullan/> We look forward to taking the learning and work that was generated to the next stage when we have a permanent new home.¹⁵ We hope this artwork will serve as beacon indicating the location of what we hope will become a national resource and hub for information on women in Scotland and of their cultural and historical achievements.

Issues besetting the creation of art, by and about women, in particular for artists using the still 'masculinised' fields of fine art painting and sculpture, and those like Sharon Thomas, making monuments, portraits and memorials, have paradoxically proliferated in the past 40 years since the feminist project has been seeking to address

¹¹ Mrs Anne Maxwell Macdonald, born in Pollock House in 1906 was to bequeath the House, her art collection and the hundreds of acres of her estate to Glasgow on her death.

¹² <http://www.womenslibrary.org.uk/supportgwl/donations/womenontheshelf/>

¹³ For an article covering this honouring of Aung San Suu Kyi see 'City gives 'freedom' to Suu Kyi', Craig Brown, *Scotsman*, 5 March 2009. For information about Aung San Suu Kyi campaign for democracy in Burma see <http://www.amnesty.org/en/appeals-for-action/time-release-aung-san-suu-kyi>

¹⁴ *The Hidden History of Glasgow's Women, The Thew Factor*, Elspeth King, Mainstream Publishing, Edinburgh, 1993

¹⁵ For ongoing information about our vision for a fit for purpose, accessible home for Glasgow Women's Library, its collections and learners visit www.womenslibrary.org.uk

the systemic and institutionalised erasure or exclusion of women's achievements from the history books and civic landscape. Feminists taking their cues from germinal art feminist art critics and historians, such as Lucy Lippard in the US and Griselda Pollock in Britain, have questioned the appropriateness of using approaches and mediums so thoroughly associated with patriarchal power and that are so inextricably bound up with the masculinised language and constructions of art and art history; how do women work with a legacy of masculinised forms of representation? How can new work that marks women's achievements avoid replicating systems that separate the great and the powerful from the invisible masses? How can such works be interrogated through the practices of contemporary women artists? Many contemporary female artists, including those that are perhaps the most lauded of the new generation of women artists in Glasgow, have chosen routes that look for alternative ways to make work that both interrogate and reflect the lives of women. This has led to oeuvres that are building a canon of important Scottish Art by women including key figures like Christine Borland and Cathy Wilkes but their work is characteristically temporal, transitory, evades easy 'reading' and is not readily seen in the urban landscape.

This leaves a void in the streets, gable-ends, public walkways, parks, art, museum and other public institutions and other urban civic spaces where women's names, lives and histories could be stumbled upon, taken to communities' hearts, and absorbed and reflected upon as markers of women's lives and achievements. There is a case for permanence, visibility and opaqueness, for striking, enduring and powerful work by and about women manifestly about a subject that Glasgow has seemed uniquely reticent to inscribe in to its otherwise remarkable urban landscape. Placing women and/ or the evidence of women's creativity and cultures alongside men and the markers of masculinity in its streets, museums and parks might signal that women have worth in Glasgow, that women's work and many achievements on an international stage are a source of genuine pride and, that respect of Glasgow's women citizens be inextricably part of the regeneration package. That would indeed be Miles Better.

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